

some pages excerpted from

Treatise on Etiquette
for the Younger Generations

aka The Revolution of Everyday Life

Raoul Vaneigem
Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith

One of the two (with *Society of the Spectacle*) most influential texts out of the Situationists, an important international group of artists and ex-artists in the 1960s.

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down with
a world in
which the
guarantee
that we will
not die of
starvation
has been
purchased
with the
guarantee
that we
will die of
boredom. **On Creativity**

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On Creativity

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to be found elsewhere: in the facts, in the events we bring about. The poetry of the facts, formerly always treated as marginal, now stands at the centre of everyone's concerns, at the centre of daily life, a sphere which as a matter of fact it has never left.

True poetry cares nothing for poems. In his quest for the Book, Mallarmé wanted nothing so much as to abolish the poem. What better way could there be of abolishing the poem than realising it? And indeed a few of Mallarmé's contemporaries proved themselves rather brilliant exponents of just such a 'new poetry'. Did the author of *Hérodiade* have an inkling, perhaps, when he described them as 'angels of purity', that the anarchists with their bombs offered the poet a key which, walled up in his words, he could never use?

Poetry is always somewhere. Its recent abandonment of the arts makes it easier to see that it resides primarily in individual acts, in a lifestyle and in the search for such a style. Everywhere repressed, this poetry springs up everywhere. Brutally put down, it is reborn in violence. It plays muse to rioters, informs revolt and animates all great revolutionary carnivals for a while, until the bureaucrats consign it to the prison of hagiography.

Lived poetry has effectively shown throughout history, even in partial revolts, even in crime—which Coeurderoy so aptly dubbed the "revolt of one"—that it is the protector *par excellence* of everything irreducible in mankind, that is to say, of creative spontaneity. The will to unite the individual and the social, not on the basis of an illusory community but on that of subjectivity—this is what makes the new poetry into a weapon which everyone must learn to handle *by himself*. Poetic experience is henceforth at a premium. The organisation of spontaneity will be the work of spontaneity itself.

with Villon, Lucretius, Rabelais, Pascal, Fourier, Bosch, Dante, Bach, Swift, Shakespeare, Uccello, etc. All are liable to shed their cultural chrysalis, emerge from the museums to which history has relegated them and become so much dynamite for the bombs of the future realisers of art. Thus the value of an old work of art should be assessed on the basis of the amount of radical theory that can be drawn from it, on the basis of the nucleus of creative spontaneity which the new creators will be able to release from it for the purposes of—and by means of—an unprecedented kind of poetry.

Radical theory's forte is its ability to postpone an action begun by creative spontaneity without mitigating it or redirecting its thrust. Conversely, the artistic approach seeks in its finest moments to stamp the world with the impress of a tentacular subjective activity constantly seeking to create, and to create itself. Whereas radical theory sticks close to poetic reality, to reality in process and to the world as it is being changed, art takes an identical tack but at much greater risk of being lost and corrupted. Only an art armed against itself, against its own weaker side—its most aesthetic side—has any hope of evading co-optation.

Consumer society, as we well know, reduces art to a range of consumable products. The more vulgarised this reduction, the faster the rate of decomposition and the greater the chances for transcendence. That communication so urgently sought by the artist is cut off and prohibited even in the simplest relationships of everyday life. So true is this that the search for new forms of communication, far from being the preserve of painters and poets, is now part of a collective effort. In this way the old specialisation of art has finally come to an end. There are no more artists because everyone is an artist. The work of art of the future will be the construction of a passionate life.

The object created is less important than the process which gives rise to it, the act of creating. What makes an artist is his state of creativity, not art galleries. Unfortunately, artists rarely recognise themselves as creators: most of the time they play to the gallery, exhibitionistically. A contemplative attitude before a work of art was the first stone thrown at the creator. He encouraged this attitude in the first place, but today it is his undoing: now it amounts to no more than a need to consume, an expression of the crassest economic imperatives. This is why there is no longer any such thing as a work of art in the classical sense of the word. Nor can there be such a thing. So much the better. Poetry is

IN THIS FRACTURED WORLD, whose common denominator throughout history has been hierarchical social power, only one freedom has ever been tolerated: the freedom to change the numerator, the freedom to prefer one master to another. Freedom of choice so understood has increasingly lost its attraction—especially since it became the official doctrine of the worst totalitarianisms of the modern world, East and West. The generalisation of the refusal to make such a Hobson's choice—to do no more than change employers—has in turn occasioned a restructuring of State power. All the governments of the industrialised or semi-industrialised world now tend to model themselves—to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their nation's level of development—after a single prototype: the common aim is to rationalise, to 'automate', the old forms of domination. And herein lies freedom's first chance. The bourgeois democracies have clearly shown that individual freedoms can be tolerated only insofar as they entrench upon and destroy one another; and now that this is clear, it has become impossible for any government, no matter how sophisticated, to wave the *muleta* of freedom without everyone discerning the sword concealed behind it. In fact the constant evocation of freedom merely incites freedom to rediscover its roots in individual creativity, to break out of its official definition as the permitted, the licit, the tolerable—to shatter the benevolence of despotism.

Freedom's second chance comes once it has retrieved its creative authenticity, and is tied up with the very mechanisms of Power. It is obvious that abstract systems of exploitation and domination are human creations, brought into being and refined through the diversion or co-optation of creativity. The only forms of creativity that authority can deal with, or wishes to deal with, are those which the spectacle can co-opt. But what people do officially is nothing compared with what they do in secret. People usually associate creativity with works of art, but what are works of art alongside the creative energy displayed by everyone a thousand times a day? Alongside seething unsatisfied desires, daydreams in search of a foothold in reality, feelings at once confused and luminously clear, ideas and gestures presaging

nameless upheavals? All this energy, of course, is relegated to anonymity and deprived of adequate means of expression, imprisoned by survival and obliged to find outlets by sacrificing its qualitative richness and conforming to the spectacle's categories. Think of Cheval's palace, the Watts Towers, Fourier's inspired system, or the pictorial universe of Douanier Rousseau. Even more to the point, consider the incredible diversity of *anyone's* dreams—landscapes the brilliance of whose colours qualitatively surpass the finest canvases of a Van Gogh. Every individual is constantly building an ideal world within himself, even as his external motions bend to the requirements of soulless routine.

Nobody, no matter how alienated, is without (or unaware of) an irreducible core of creativity, a *camera obscura* safe from intrusion, from lies and constraints. If ever social organisation extends its control to this stronghold of humanity, its domination will no longer be exercised over anything save robots, or corpses. And, in a sense, this is why consciousness of creative energy increases, paradoxically enough, as a function of consumer society's efforts to co-opt it.

Argus is blind to the danger right in front of him. Where quantity reigns, quality has no legal existence; but this is the very thing that safeguards and nourishes it. I have already mentioned the fact that the dissatisfaction bred by the manic pursuit of quantity calls forth a radical desire for the qualitative. The more oppression is justified in terms of the freedom to consume, the more the malaise arising from this contradiction exacerbates the thirst for total freedom. The crisis of production-based capitalism pointed up the element of repressed creativity in the energy expended by the worker, and Marx gave us the definitive exposé of this alienation of creativity through forced labour, through the exploitation of the producer. Whatever the capitalist system and its avatars (their antagonisms notwithstanding) lose on the production front they try to make up for in the sphere of consumption. The idea is that, as they gradually free themselves from the imperatives of production, men should be trapped by the newer obligations of the consumer. By opening up the wasteland of 'leisure' to a creativity liberated at long last thanks to reduced working hours, our kindly apostles of humanism are really only raising an army suitable for training on the parade ground of a consumption-based economy. Now that the alienation of the consumer is being exposed by the dialectic internal to consumption itself, what kind of prison can be devised for the highly subversive forces of individual creativity? As I

in the right way to immobilise a locomotive." Thanks to this bit of quick thinking, the tables were turned on the government and capitalists. Here it is clear that poetry is the act which brings new realities into being, the act which reverses the perspective. The *materia prima* is within everyone's reach. Poets are those who know how to use it to best effect. Moreover, two sous' worth of some chemical is nothing compared with the profusion of unrivalled energy generated and made available by everyday life itself: the energy of the will to live, of desire unleashed, of the passion of love, the power of fear and anxiety, the hurricane of hatred and the wild impetus of the urge for destruction. What poetic upheavals may confidently be expected to stem from such universally experienced feelings as those associated with death, old age and sickness. The long revolution of everyday life, the only true poetry-made-by-all, will take this still marginal consciousness as its point of departure.

"What is poetry?" ask the aesthetes. And we may as well give them the obvious answer right away: poetry rarely involves poems these days. Most works of art are betrayals of poetry. How could it be otherwise, when poetry and power are irreconcilable? At best, the artist's creativity is imprisoned, cloistered within an unfinished *oeuvre*, awaiting the day when it will have the last word. Unfortunately, no matter how much importance the artist gives it, this last word, which is supposed to usher in perfect communication, will never be pronounced so long as the revolt of creativity has not realised art.

The African work of art—poem, music, sculpture or mask—is not considered complete until it has become a form of speech, a word-in-action, a creative element which *functions*. Actually this is true for more than African art. There is no art in the world which does not seek to function; and to function—even on the level of later co-optation—consistently with the very same will which generated it, the will to live constantly in the euphoria of the moment of creation. Why is it that the work of the greatest artists never seems to have an end? The answer is that great art cries out in every possible way for realisation, for the right to enter lived experience. The present decomposition of art is a bow perfectly readied for such an arrow.

Nothing can save past culture from the cult of the past except those pictures, writings, musical or lithic architectures, etc, whose qualitative dimension gets through to us free of its form—of all art forms. This happens with de Sade and Lautréamont, of course, but also

to it, ie, resistance to co-opted forms of creativity, occurs amid such a plethora of cultural goods—records, films, paperback books—that once these commodities have been freed from the laws of consumption they will pass immediately into the service of true creativity. The sabotage of the mechanisms of economic and cultural consumption is epitomised by young people who steal the books in which they expect to find confirmation of their radicalism.

Once the light of the qualitative is shed upon them, the most varied kinds of knowledge combine and form a magnetic bridge powerful enough to overthrow the weightiest traditions. The force of plain spontaneous creativity increases knowledge at an exponential rate. Using makeshift equipment and negligible funds, a German engineer recently built an apparatus able to replace the cyclotron. If individual creativity can achieve such results with such meagre stimulation, what marvels of energy must be expected from the qualitative shock waves and chain reactions that will occur when the spirit of freedom still alive in the individual re-emerges in collective form to celebrate the great social *fête*, with its joyful breaking of all taboos.

POETRY. What is poetry? It is the organisation of creative spontaneity, the exploitation of the qualitative in accordance with its internal laws of coherence. Poetry is what the Greeks call *poiein*, 'making', but 'making' restored to the purity of its moment of genesis—seen, in other words, from the point of view of the totality.

Poetry cannot exist in the absence of the qualitative. In this absence we find the opposite of the qualitative: information, the transitional programme, specialisation, reformism—the various guises of the fragmentary. The presence of the qualitative does not of itself guarantee poetry, however. A rich complex of signs and possibilities may get lost in confusion, disintegrate from lack of coherence, or be destroyed by crossed purposes. The criterion of effectiveness must remain supreme. Thus poetry is also radical theory completely embodied in action; the mortar binding tactics and revolutionary strategy; the high point of the great gamble on everyday life.

What is poetry? In 1895, during an ill-advised and seemingly foredoomed French railway workers' strike, one trade unionist stood up and mentioned an ingenious and cheap way of advancing the strikers' cause: "It takes two sous' worth of a certain substance used

have already pointed out, the rulers' last chance here is to turn us all into organisers of our own passivity.

With touching candour, Dewitt Peters remarks that, "If paints, brushes and canvas were handed out to everyone who wanted them, the results might be quite interesting". It is true that if this policy were applied in a variety of well-defined and well-policed spheres, such as the theatre, the plastic arts, music, writing, etc, and in a general way to any such sphere susceptible of total isolation from all others, then the system might have a hope of endowing people with the consciousness of the artist, ie, the consciousness of someone who makes a profession of displaying his creativity in the museums and shop windows of culture. The popularity of such a culture would be a perfect index of Power's success. Fortunately, the chances of people being successfully 'culturised' in this way are now slight. Do the cyberneticians really imagine that people can be persuaded to engage in free experiment within bounds laid down by authoritarian decree? Or that prisoners who have become aware of their creative capacity will be content to decorate their cells with original graffiti? They are more likely to apply their newfound *penchant* for experiment in other spheres: firearms, desires, dreams, self-realisation techniques. Especially since the crowd is already full of agitators. No: the last possible way of co-opting creativity, which is the organisation of artistic passivity, is happily doomed to failure.

"What I am trying to reach," wrote Paul Klee, "is a far-off point, at the sources of creation, where I suspect a single explanatory principle applies for man, animals, plants, fire, water, air and all the forces that surround us." As a matter of fact, this point is only far off in Power's lying perspective: the source of all creation lies in individual creativity; it is from this starting point that everything, being or thing, is ordered in accordance with poetry's grand freedom. This is the take-off point of the new perspective: that perspective for which everyone is struggling willy-nilly with all his strength and at every moment of his existence. "Subjectivity is the only truth", says Kierkegaard.

Power cannot enlist true creativity. In 1869 the Brussels police thought they had found the famous gold of the International, about which the capitalists were losing so much sleep. They seized a huge strongbox hidden in some dark corner. When they opened it, however, they found only coal. Little did the police know that the pure gold of the International would always turn into coal if touched by enemy hands.

The laboratory of individual creativity transmutes the basest metals of daily life into gold through a revolutionary alchemy. The prime objective is to disclose slave consciousness, consciousness of impotence, by releasing creativity's magnetic power; impotence is magically dispelled as creative energy surges forth, genius serene in its self-assurance. So sterile on the plane of the race for prestige in the spectacle, megalomania is an important phase in the struggle of the self against the combined forces of conditioning. The creative spark, which is the spark of true life, shines all the more brightly in the night of nihilism which at present envelops us. As the project of a better organisation of survival aborts, the sparks will become more and more numerous and gradually coalesce into a single light, the promise of a new organisation based this time on the harmonising of individual wills. History is leading us to the crossroads where radical subjectivity is destined to encounter the possibility of changing the world. The crossroads of the reversal of perspective.

SPONTANEITY. Spontaneity is the true mode of being of individual creativity, creativity's initial, immaculate form, unpolluted at the source and as yet unthreatened by the mechanisms of co-optation. Whereas creativity in the broad sense is the most equitably distributed thing imaginable, spontaneity seems to be confined to a chosen few. Its possession is a privilege of those whom long resistance to Power has endowed with a consciousness of their own value as individuals. In revolutionary moments this means the majority; in other periods, when the old mole works unseen, day by day, it is still more people than one might think. For so long as the light of creativity continues to shine spontaneity has a chance.

"The new artist protests", wrote Tzara in 1919. "He no longer paints: he creates directly." The new artists of the future, constructors of situations to be lived, will undoubtedly have immediacy as their most succinct— though also their most radical—demand. I say 'succinct' because it is important after all not to be confused by the connotations of the word 'spontaneity'. Spontaneity can never spring from internalised restraints, even subconscious ones, nor can it survive the effects of alienating abstraction and spectacular co-optation: it is a conquest, not a given. The reconstruction of the individual presupposes the reconstruction of the unconscious (compare the construction of dreams).

Imagine apartments located immediately above one another, communicating directly by means of a central elevator and also indirectly linked by an outside spiral staircase. People in the different apartments have direct access to each other, whereas someone climbing the spiral stairs is cut off from them. The former have access to the qualitative at all levels; the latter's knowledge is limited to one step at a time, and so no dialogue is possible between the two.

access to each other, whereas someone slowly climbing the spiral stairs is cut off from them. The former have access to the qualitative at all levels; the latter's knowledge is limited to one step at a time, and so no dialogue is possible between the two. Thus, the revolutionary workers of 1848 were no doubt incapable of reading the Communist Manifesto, yet they possessed within themselves the essential lessons of Marx's and Engels's text. In fact, this is what made the Marxist theory truly radical. The objective conditions of the worker's life, expressed by the Manifesto on the level of theory, made it possible for the most illiterate proletarian to understand Marx immediately when the moment came. The cultivated man who uses his culture like a flame thrower is bound to get on with the uncultivated man who experiences what the first man puts in scholarly terms in the lived reality of his everyday life. The arms of criticism do indeed have to join forces with criticism by force of arms.

Only the qualitative permits a higher stage to be reached in one bound. This is the lesson that any endangered group must learn, the pedagogy of the barricades. The graded world of hierarchical power, however, can only envisage knowledge as being similarly graded: the people on the spiral staircase, experts on the type and number of steps, meet, pass, bump into one another and trade insults. What difference does it make? At the bottom we have the auto-didact gorged on platitudes, at the top the intellectual collecting ideas like butterflies: mirror images of foolishness. The opposition between Miguel de Unamuno and the repulsive Millan Astray, between the paid thinker and his reviler, is an empty one: where the qualitative is not in evidence, intelligence is a fool's cap and bells.

The alchemists called those elements needed for the Great Work the *materia prima*. Paracelsus's description of this applies perfectly to the qualitative: "It is obvious that the poor possess it in greater abundance than the rich. People squander the good portion of it and keep only the bad. It is visible and invisible, and children play with it in the street. But the ignorant crush it underfoot everyday." The consciousness of this qualitative *materia prima* may be expected to become more and more acute in most minds as the bastions of specialised thought and graded knowledge collapse. Those who make a profession of creating, and those whose profession prevents them from creating, both artists and workers, are being pushed into the same nihilism by the process of proletarianisation. This process, which is accompanied by resistance

What spontaneous creativity has lacked up to now is a clear consciousness of its poetry. The common-sense view has always treated spontaneity as a primary state, an initial stage in need of theoretical adaptation, of transposition into formal terms. This view isolates spontaneity, treats it as a thing-in-itself—and thus recognises it only in the travestied forms which it acquires within the spectacle (eg. action painting). In point of fact spontaneous creativity carries the seeds of a self-sufficient development within itself. It is possessed of its own poetry.

For me spontaneity is immediate experience, consciousness of a lived immediacy threatened on all sides yet not yet alienated, not yet relegated to inauthenticity. The centre of lived experience is that place where everyone comes closest to himself. Within this unique space-time we have the clear conviction that reality exempts us from necessity. Consciousness of necessity is always what alienates us. We have been taught to apprehend ourselves by default—in *absentia*, so to speak. But it takes a single moment of awareness of real life to eliminate all alibis, and consign the absence of future to the same void as the absence of past. Consciousness of the present harmonises with lived experience in a sort of extemporisation. The pleasure this brings us—impoverished by its isolation, yet potentially rich because it reaches out towards an identical pleasure in other people — bears a striking resemblance to the enjoyment of jazz. At its best, improvisation in everyday life has much in common with jazz as evoked by Dauer: "The African conception of rhythm differs from the Western in that it is perceived through bodily movement rather than aurally. The technique consists essentially in the introduction of discontinuity into the static balance imposed upon time by rhythm and metre. This discontinuity, which results from the existence of ecstatic centres of gravity out of time with the musical rhythm and metre proper, creates a constant tension between the static beat and the ecstatic beat which is superimposed on it."

The instant of creative spontaneity is the minutest possible manifestation of the reversal of perspective. It is a unitary moment, ie, one and many. The eruption of lived pleasure is such that in losing myself I find myself; forgetting that I exist, I realise myself. Consciousness of immediate experience lies in this oscillation, in this improvisational jazz. By contrast, thought directed towards lived experience with analytic intent is bound to remain detached from that experience. This applies to all reflection on everyday life, including, to be sure, the pres-

ent one. To combat this, all I can do is try to incorporate an element of constant self-criticism, so as to make the work of co-optation a little harder than usual. The traveller who is always thinking about the length of the road before him tires more easily than his companion who lets his imagination wander as he goes along. Similarly, anxious attention paid to lived experience can only impede it, abstract it, and make it into nothing more than a series of memories-to-be.

If thought is really to find a basis in lived experience, it has to be free. The way to achieve this is to think *other* in terms of *the same*. As you make yourself, imagine another self who will make you one day in his turn. Such is my conception of spontaneity: the highest possible self-consciousness which is still inseparable from the self and from the world.

All the same, the paths of spontaneity are hard to find. Industrial civilisation has let them become overgrown. And even when we find real life, knowing the best way to grasp it is not easy. Individual experience is also prey to insanity—a foothold for madness. Kierkegaard described this state of affairs as follows: “It is true that I have a lifebelt, but I cannot see the pole which is supposed to pull me out of the water. This is a ghastly way to experience things.” The pole is there, of course, and no doubt everyone could grab on to it, though many would be so slow about it that they would die of anxiety before realising its existence. But exist it does, and its name is radical subjectivity: the consciousness that all people have the same will to authentic self-realisation, and that their subjectivity is strengthened by the perception of this subjective will in others. This way of getting out of oneself and radiating out, not so much towards others as towards that part of oneself that is to be found in others, is what gives creative spontaneity the strategic importance of a launching pad. The concepts and abstractions which rule us have to be returned to their source, to lived experience, not in order to validate them, but on the contrary to correct them, to turn them on their heads, to restore them to that sphere whence they derive and which they should never have left. This is a necessary precondition of people’s imminent realisation that their individual creativity is indistinguishable from universal creativity. The sole authority is one’s own lived experience: and this everyone must prove to everyone else.

THE QUALITATIVE. I have already said that creativity, though equally distributed to all, only finds direct, spontaneous expression on specific occasions. These occasions are pre-revolutionary moments, the source of the poetry that changes life and transforms the world. They must surely be placed under the sign of that modern equivalent of grace, the qualitative. The presence of the divine abomination is revealed by a cloying spirituality suddenly conferred upon all, from the rustic to the most refined: on a cretin like Claudel as readily as on a St John of the Cross. Similarly, a gesture, an attitude, perhaps merely a word, may suffice to show that poetry’s chance is at hand, that the total construction of everyday life, a global reversal of perspective—in short, the revolution—are immanent possibilities. The qualitative encapsulates and crystallises these possibilities; it is a direct communication of the essential.

One day Kagame heard an old woman of Rwanda, who could neither read nor write, complaining: “Really, these whites are incurably simple-minded. They have no brains at all.” “How can you be so stupid?” he answered her. “I would like to see you invent so many unimaginably marvellous things as the whites have done.” With a condescending smile, the old woman replied, “Listen, my child. They may have learned a lot of things, but they have no brains. They don’t understand anything.” And she was right, for the curse of technological civilisation, of quantified exchange and scientific knowledge, is that they have created no means of freeing people’s spontaneous creativity *directly*; indeed, they do not even allow people to *understand* the world in any unmediated fashion. The sentiments expressed by the Rwandan woman—whom the Belgian administrator doubtless looked upon, from the heights of his superior intelligence, as a wild animal—are also to be found, though laden with guilt and thus tainted by crass stupidity, in the old platitude: “I have studied a great deal and now know that I know nothing.” For it is false, in a sense, to say that study can teach us nothing, so long as study does not abandon the point of view of the totality. What this attitude refuses to see, or to learn, are the various stages of the qualitative—whatever, at whatever level, lends support to the qualitative. Imagine a number of apartments located immediately above one another, communicating directly by means of a central elevator and also indirectly linked by an outside spiral staircase. People in the different apartments have direct